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Claustrophobia in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*: Negotiating the Past with the Present

Humaira Riaz

City University of Science & IT, Peshawar, Pakistan.

Email: humairariaz@cusit.edu.pk

Asfandiyar Shah

Lecturer Bacha Khan University, Charsadda

Email: Asfandiyar.eng@bkuc.edu.pk

Abstract

This article reworks the notion of "claustrophobia," symbolically in relevance to expatriate fiction writing. Claustrophobia is an individual's fear of being confined in an enclosed space. Qualitative in nature, this paper critically investigates Monica Ali's Brick Lane (2003) that delineates a constant fear in the immigrant characters alienated from their host country. Globalisation owes much to provide rationale for the current study. Within the larger context of Diaspora, Sarup's notion of migration, with both negative and positive implications, is used as a theoretical framework to study the juncture of expatriate desire of home and examine how exile causes an irrational fear entrapping immigrants in the wake of socio-cultural and economic differences. The present study refers to it as a state of "being ambivalent" and concludes that exile (forced or by choice) though deadening, regenerates life for those who exercise their energies to combat their existing situations. For others, it proves fatal. The study significantly provides an insight into South Asian culture and norms in comparison to British culture and through Ali's work challenges the allegation against women's writings being limited in experience, non-scientific and "womanly."

Keywords

Claustrophobia, diaspora, migration, exile, identity, displacement

Introduction

History is replete with examples of human migration. Srivastava argues that in South Asian countries migration came to limelight mainly due to economic developments. The period after the Second World War experienced a rapid increase in the movement of South Asian people to the West. Though the pattern of these movements in the developed countries was different, this growth

has given these immigrants political, economic and social stability to an extent. Studies have shown that voluntary migration pertained to the immigrants' conception of England and America as lands of opportunities. People move from one place to another in the pursuit of better living, educational standards and desire for socio-economic stability (Riaz 163). Studies have also illustrated the negative influence of socio-economic deprivations on individual's health as well (Patel, 2020).

The mid-twentieth century particularly witnessed migration largely within the constraint of globalisation widening gaps between developing and developed countries. Parallel to socio-economic issues, racism in the form of cultural differences and skin colour (causing anxiety and fear among the sufferers) seriously affected the lives of those who migrated and settled in foreign countries to find prosperity and a secure future. However, their "perceptions... were always in a flux and yet dangerously alluring" (Hasanat 58). Claustrophobia is one such psychological fear this study explores in the immigrants. A Latin word, from "claustrum" which means "lock," "bolt," and Greek "phobos," Claustrophobia is the "fear" of place. Usually inexplicable and unsubstantiated, this fear often expands into socially disagreeable behaviour.

Fanon introduced and analysed phobia in three parts: "the paralogical nature of phobic thinking, its links to imaginary aggression, and its hallucinatory and affective structure" referred to as "Freud's second theory of anxiety" (Bery and Murray 111). Phobia thus, is a neurosis characterized by the anxious fear of an object.

Various forms of phobias are rationalised by numerous explanations. Psychologists agree that fear directs people to take the wrong path. A variety of dreadful and agonising incidents, historical events and the unknown may cause fear. According to the psychologists, fear is articulated at diverse levels, particularly triggered by "the anticipation of being harmed in future" (Ratcliffe 138). At its maximum level, fear forces people to have incongruous preferences. "Terror" and "horror" are every so often considered synonymous to fear when people apprehend an impending danger by sensing the background of some "painful events." Phobia in psychological condition may not cause physical disturbance such as fast breathing or racing heart. Nevertheless, it may appear in some other form. It is termed "irrational" because psychologists have defined it as "maladaptive response" (Watt para1). Its "escalation" to a level of irrationality is due to genetic as well as environmental elements. Psychology, however, fails to identify any "specific phobia gene." For environmental constituent, phobia is developed in the wake of some frightful event, witnessed

or suffered personally. The painful incidence contributes to the intensification of phobia. “Phobias involve the experience of persistent fear that is excessive and unreasonable”(Hatfield para3). Psychologists further have taken the stance that fear is required to do a great deal of damage to be defined as phobia ([Hatfield](#) para3). It has also been defined as “a type of mental-illness” where environment appears as its strong and essential constituent ([Hatfield](#) para3).

Consciousness develops when individuals are exposed to a new environment (Ankersmit 265). It is an individual’s experience of having entered a new world that develops “the awareness of irreparably having lost a previous world forever” (Ankersmit 265). “Loyalties” may possibly not alter but there remains “an unwanted unconscious or conscious acceptance of the new and what is present” (Riaz and Babae 166). It is “unwanted” mostly because immigration does not altogether erase their cultural associations. This awareness is a constant source of anxiety. Many of the immigrants adopt perceptive ways of cultural productions such as novels, dramas, etc. Narrative writing is adopted as tools to visualise identity for the purpose of self-actualisation and survival (Young 108). Since literature has the capacity to represent the “ambivalence and complexity of contemporaneous social experience,” it effectively contours furtherance and stimulation of the immigrants (Weinberger106). Migration has also expanded literature written by the expatriates who focused on the issues of identity (*The South Asian Diaspora Translational Networks and Changing Identities* 3).

To substantiate such arguments, the present study critically analyses Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* (2003) and identifies a constant fear (arising out of displacement) in the fictional immigrant characters, which alienates them from their host land (England). This work is selected for analysis primarily because Ali is an expatriate writer who portrays the immigrant characters constantly negotiating their identities. It also investigates the socio-cultural differences instrumental in stimulating claustrophobia that fracture immigrants’ identities. Monica Ali was known in the literary circles on the basis of only a few chapters that she could publish even before her first book was released. That gave her career a boost as a fiction writer. She was voted as one of Granta’s Best of Young British Novelists. Her prominent works are *Bricklane* (2003), *Alentejo Blue* (2006) and *In the Kitchen* (2009).

Another reason to analyse *Brick Lane* generates out of the thoughts of critics such as Ruzy Suliza Hashim (2009) pointing out the scarcity of attention rendered to literature by women writers, despite the fact that their writings reflect distinct notions of homeland (392). Women

writers portray a realistic world showing nostalgia and enlightenment of the female protagonists who, surrounded by prejudices and problems, reconcile their faith. The present study reworks the notion that experiences of the immigrant protagonists lead them towards retention or rejection of homeland memories. Female characters display the flexibility by abandoning their past for the present whereas male characters stand to retain their own whim. Primarily, the notion of home in expatriate writings can be imaginary but in all its meanings it offers a concept of shelter and refuge.

Literature Review

Space has been valued over time as the most significant ordering notion of reality determining “dependence or independence” of various objects (Bohm xv). This veracity compels us to think about our actual being and the “new” that emerges as a result of our social and cultural displacement (Ashcroft, Tiffin and Griffith 36-7). Ashcroft, Tiffin and Griffith discussed an individual’s strong associations to the past and emphasized equally the creativity and advanced vision of Diasporas (37). Safran (1991) defined the expatriate minority communities who “dispersed from an original center... feel partly alienated from [host land]... their consciousness is defined by a bond with the homeland” (83-84).

Immigrants immerse into trouble during the process of migration. Their identities are confronted with “multicultural flux of present” (Shackleton 2). Mukherjee (1988) defined the term “dislocation not as a failure but an expansion of cultural and aesthetic experiences of those dispersed” (cited in Riaz 65). Experiences of displacement and alienation generated themes for the expatriate writers giving primacy to the place; a dominant concept in Diaspora Studies.

Gilroy defined Diaspora Literature reflecting a double vision at once; of yearning back and looking forward (1). It may not be the case with all immigrants. Their double vision may leave them in ambiguity about their roles in foreign society. They belong everywhere and at the sometime nowhere like “uncertain souls” (Gilroy 1). Moreover, diasporas “track down a collective memory of another place and time” to devise new plans “of desire and attachment” (Appadurai & Breckenridge 31). Trinh T. Minh-Ha (1991) argued that in case of displacement the marginalized group if displaced is never allowed to surpass the centre where they are settled (2006). The line between the outsider and insider must stop somewhere. It is difficult to define this line, whether in terms of colour, language, nation, geography or political affinity. Living at the ‘crossroads of cultures’ immigrants internalize mental stress and void in which they live

(Achebe,1973). However, distance never becomes a reason for separation. Cultures are neither ‘unitary’ nor simply ‘dualistic’. There is a ‘Third Space’ which keeps the other two mobilized (Bhabha,1988, p.208). British Asian young people scarcely adhere to cultural practices of their parents, yet they retain a strong ‘associational’ identity which is more often response to racial rejection (Modood cited in Ali, Kalra & Sayyid, 2006).

It is this element of elasticity and changeability that compels people to negotiate their identities. Contemporary South Asian and South East Asian literature reflects this identity crisis, however, with profound emphasis on negotiation. The present study discusses how exile causes an irrational fear in the immigrants in the wake of socio-cultural and economic discrepancies when some immigrants represent their respective community by adhering to their conventions whereas others are lost in the mainstream by negotiating the past with the present.

Research Methodology

This study is qualitative in nature and attempts to explore the notion of displacement and a constant fear arising among the immigrants. It discusses Sarup’s concept of “Being and Becoming” in relation to Monica Ali’s *Bricklane*.

Identities should be envisaged as a process where individual searches for a home (Sarup 96). Within this process, the picture of “self” continuously alters. Migration profoundly transforms identity (Sarup 97-98). Sarup has discussed migration with both negative and positive implications. Identity is changed by the journey; travelling restores the bias of an individual. However:

in this transformation every step forward can also be a step back, the migrant is here and there. Exile can be deadening but it can also be creative. Exile can be an affliction but it can also be a transfiguration-it can be a resource (Sarup 98).

Identity does not only have to do with “being” but also with “becoming” (Sarup14). It is the “condition of being a specified person or thing” (Elizabeth Jewell 2006, p.401). Sarup’s term “dynamics” delineated the boundaries of identity constructed in a process (18). He discussed identity as fragmented and contradictory (14). He affirmation of two identities being maintained; “outside (public)” and “inside (private)” holds the fact how one is viewed by others and how one

perceives self (14). Moreover, identity is not a “flat description” of one’s self; it constructs a coherent image of one’s personality by taking into account various perspectives (Venet15).

“Journey between Roots and Routes”

Journey between ‘roots and routes’ is agonizing and full of ‘insurmountable dilemmas’ (Nayar199). Monica Ali’s novel *Brick Lane* is considered a narrative of achievement of an immigrant Bangladeshi family living among a small Bangladeshi community in Brick Lane, London. Nazneen, the female protagonist is brought to London by marriage with Chanu who migrated to England for a better future and education. This novel is loaded with expressions exposing discontentment and agitation of Nazneen and her husband Chanu. Their only contentment is in the freedom of thought:

Six months now since she’d been sent away to London. Every morning before she opened her eyes she thought, *if I were the wishing type, I know what I would wish* (Ali 18).

Ali chooses London Borough of Tower Hamlets, a place where mostly Bangladeshi immigrants are living, as the setting of her novel. Here resides multi-culture community. “In the flats immediately next door, there were white people” (Ali 304). Moreover, carrying out their daily chores, Bangladeshi immigrants meet people from different races “a group of African girls tried on shoes ... a white girl stood in front of a mirror turning this way and that” (Ali 392-94). In such a society, racial issues add to the fears people in minority.

Feeling alienated in a new land might be a natural phenomenon as Storti pointed out in his book “*The Art of Crossing Cultures*”:

I felt as if all my knowledge was being squeezed out of me, like an orange. And they [hosts] really do believe they are racially superior and that we are no better than cats or dogs (xv).

In *Brick Lane* a similar anxiety and fear of dislocation is exposed through vivid descriptions of places where Nazneen grew up. She virtually breathes and exists in Dhaka. Moreover, her physical

existence in a completely new and strange world scares her continuously. She adheres to prayers and solicits mercy from God, which indicates her mind enduring a constant battle that promulgates her anxiety. It is reminiscent of the “paralogical” nature of phobic thinking and its ‘hallucinatory and affective structure’ that annunciate her sentiments (Berry& Murry 357). It smears the vision of her homeland and keeps her awake all the night:

Sometimes she dreamed the wardrobe has fallen on her, crushing her on the mattress. Sometimes she dreamed she was locked inside it and hammered and hammered but nobody heard (Ali 24).

It reflects her phobia “a neurosis characterized by fear” of that place (Marriott 1949). She enters a world where she has to bear many obstacles. What changes her life are the conflicting questions arising in her mind from the initial pages of the novel leading to her new experiences and transformations: “What could not be changed must be borne. And since nothing could be changed, everything had to be borne. This principle ruled her life” (Ali 23). Her immensely pessimistic and uncertain thoughts lead to an “imaginary aggression” that anticipate her reconciliation (Berry& Murry 2000).

Nazneen grapples with isolation in London striving to ostracize herself in this remote and unfamiliar culture. The nature of her fears is casuistry preponderated by sentiments and emotions. She welcomes the paradoxes of her life. However, she is unable to come out of the whirlpool instantaneously. Her identity is confronted with “multicultural flux of present” (Shackleton 2). She speculates the status of the white woman in her neighbourhood and questions her household status. Frightened of being disowned, fear bounds her behind the doors. Living under the “unkind sun”, she underrates herself to the “white woman” (Ali18).

In Nazneen’s portrayal, we catch the prospect of an emblematic eastern woman indulged in her house hold chores and child bearing travelling drearily on the path of self-realization whereas her sister Hasina represents a liberal woman who eschews patriarchal rules. Patriarchy as a contagion spreads over every inch of Nazneen’s consciousness. Environment bridges her past with the present. Stories from her past life bring forward an understanding of “self” in her present situation (Young para3). It is primarily because Nazneen’s personality appears a blend of patriarchal substance making it difficult for her to endure a new life. In contrast to Hasina, for

Nazneen “her state of being” is her fate. When fears of rejection obsess minds, individuals anticipate hurdles. “Is it better than our own country, or is it worse? If it is worse, then why is he [Chanu] here? If it is better, why does he complain?” (Ali 72).

Despondently, Nazneen often questions her presence in London. Brought by fate to a foreign land, her mind is perturbed and unable to survive the unfamiliar preponderance instantaneously. Alienated from host land, her consciousness is defined by a bond with her homeland. However, the situation confers upon her “double vision” (Gilroy1). As “an uncertain soul”, she looks at the reality of her situation from two opposing “yet complementary perspectives” and arrives at the verge of an understanding (Gilroy1). She revisits her past quite often to find solace. This psychological pressure disconcerts and restrains her from building any relationship with the outside world. It is the “outside” identity, which she refuses to maintain at this point (Sarup14). Once she is exposed to this new world, she abandons a “maladaptive response” and develops state of the art attitude (Watt para 1).

Patriarchy also pertains to claustrophobia in this novel. A South Asian asset, patriarchy is carried overseas by the immigrants for sustenance of their traditions holding power over their females even abroad. Hence, Nazneen is susceptible to subdue and submit to her husband. Her speculations on meeting Dr. Azad’s family unravel her aggression against a foreign culture. Mrs. Azad’s demeanor portrays the assimilated lives of immigrants. Her attitude fills Dr. Azad with indignation and the chair seems to be the “only thing holding him up”. (Ali 112). She scorns her husband’s habit of reading books as she thinks “the smell of real life offends him” (Ali 113). Reality for her is existence. Dr. Azad’s living and relations outside his household imply the uncertainty of his situation. His subjectivity does not find outlet and he succumbs to the circumstances.

Ali’s portrayal of a strict family structure significantly lends a feministic view to her descriptions. “Nazneen took a tea towel and dried the plates. She wondered if the ice-skating woman went home and washed and wiped” (Ali 38). Conventional roles of women in the novel show the consciousness of their status, which gender supremacy determines for them.

She took Nazneen’s wide face between her two palms and spoke to her: If God wanted us to ask questions, he would have made us men” (Ali 79).

For Chanu, she is the embodiment of a “good worker”, restricted to house. “If you go out, ten people will say, I saw her walking on the street. And I will look like a fool” (Ali 22-45). Offended by Chanu’s descriptions of her body and personality, her resistance starts when in turn,

she thinks of “the rolls of fat that hung low from Chanu’s stomach” (Ali 2003, p.23).

Nazneen’s proclivity to skate exposes her desire for freedom. London that she feared once has now introduced her to independence: “-how could she not-skate through life with a sparkling smile?” (Ali 13). She proclaims emancipation.

Though customary to conventions, Nazneen dares to exploit her situation by committing adultery. Her “step forward” reflects a “step back” (Sarup98). For her exile is “deadening” at this stage (Sarup98). Her circumstances tarnish her mind and direct her to erroneous path establishing extra-marital relationship with Karim. Fears escort her to incongruous preferences. A constant fear haunts her to think of any social or religious justification; she breaks up her relation with Karim and finds solitude in prayers, ultimately returning to her religious beliefs. Although being an immigrant, it is hard for her “to fit neatly” into that kind of ‘little pocket’ (Jackson and Mazzei 41), yet she negotiates for her survival: “Behind every story of immigrant success there lays a deep tragedy” (Ali113). Through the character of Karim as an amalgamation of Eastern and Western ideals, Ali augments her inventory of “superiority of Western culture” to Bangladeshi ways of life (Mahmudul Hasan 670). In contrast to the conventional representation of Chanu, Karim is the incarnation of pro-western livelihood, which unravels the deliberation to assimilate foreign customs for survival. However, the readers find both the characters in perplexity.

Identity is relational (Sarup 47). Nazneen attains her identity in relation to the “white woman”, Mrs. Islam (her neighbour), Hasina (her sister) and Chanu (her husband) and by showing their association to cultural values. However, “labeling” is merely a technique of identity construction (Sarup48). Ali’s work reflects connection of “dynamics” and their arrangements in her narrative (Sarup14). At first glance, her characters appear powerless to control the process of identity construction. Space structures their new selves. “The so-called politics of difference” loudly articulates the condition of Nazneen as a member of the marginalized group (Sarup23). Migration of Chanu and Nazneen illustrates difference of the borders as a strong and contested issue throughout their marital life “with classed and gendered articulations” (Nitithampara2). Nazneen, shares common background with Mrs. Islam and settles easily with her.

This narrative depicts an astound picture of Chanu waiting to attain a sound economic position, which remains a delusion. In UK, expressions such as “working class” symbolize “roughness” (Horton and Krafti 2013). Chanu identified as a member of working class; rough, striving and endeavoring to makes his ends meet. To become a success is his desire. A strong and

emotional setback awaits him later when in spite of aspiration for a degree; he aims to get a driving license to run his taxi for earning himself a survival. Boasting of his homeland and its riches in the narrative indicate his feelings cloistered in the new environment. His situation arouses his fear of failure. Exposed to a different culture, Nazneen and Chanu are in a world of irresistible adversity causing intervention in their lives. Chanu's failure distances him from English society and he decides to go back. "Our community is not educated about this... But for my part, I don't plan to risk these things happening to my children. We will go back before they get spoiled" (Ali 32). Chanu's decision predicts his fears of losing his children in such a society.

I don't want him to rot here with all the skinheads and drunks. I don't want him to grow up in this racist society. I don't want him to talk back to his mother. I want him to respect his father...The only way is to take him back home (Ali 111).

Thus, the question of origin remains problematic and challenging in this case since "not all [immigrants] seek to return to the homeland" (Brah 180). Fear of losing children, family life and traditions are grave matters for immigrants. Living a liberal and free life, they foster trepidations and feelings of being entrapped. Chanu's work scenario explains his untold experiences enabling him to clear the dust from the mirror that ensnares immigrants with a delusion of better and prosperous life. Fear of being "a non-white person" generates doubt in Chanu's mind (Ali 254). "It will take him longer than any white man" (Ali 254). He might have been covering his lower qualification (required for promotion) under the fabric of prejudice. However, this does not reflect racism explicitly at this point; Chanu's indignation implies bias against Bangladeshis lurk in English society ruining their self-confidence. Reference to Bangladeshi people as "dirty little monkeys all in the same monkey clan" enfolds apprehension of the immigrants as well as their anticipation of being harmed in future (Ali 254). They have wilfully forced themselves in such a situation at the verge of falling back or leaping ahead. Between two equally perilous options, they are more inclined to pacify their present with the past, however, with exceptions. Complexes lead the immigrant characters to fears. People of various cultural backgrounds hold different opinions on the same matter. Chanu's ideas of "the clash between Western values and [his] own... and the need to preserve one's identity and heritage" replicate his fears (Ali 113). Identity is lost in the struggle of assimilation. He overtly denounces the riots of Bengali tiger as mere delusions "co-opting ...immigrants into their grand political schemata" (Ali 462).

Colonization of Bangladesh (pre partition 1947) by British rule is also a major element in

infusing claustrophobia in immigrant characters. They carry resilience along with their migration. Chanu's constant bragging about his achievements echoes his "inferiority complex" (Adler96-97). It shows his striving for superiority. He justifies his insecurities in England by discussing racism and colonialism. His feelings of insecurities occur in response to existent threats to his livelihood. He migrated to England when the economy of his own country failed to promise him an affluent future. His thoughts imitate a perpetual instability that predicts an insecure future because he failed to receive job reassurance. Though may not realistic, these reservations keep intruding his mind.

For Chanu, Dhaka becomes a manifestation of security and shelter. He does not want to raise his son among the "skinheads and drunk" (Ali111). His resentment shows his immense anxiety, "Back home if you drink you risk being an outcast. In London; if you don't drink you risk the same thing" (Ali110). His thoughts divulge rejection of the new and attachment to his birth place where he lived a better part of his life. His situation represents in a more embracing fashion his rootedness in the postcolonial state of affairs as a "free-floating subject" who could hardly pin that down in fixed terms (Ali 267). Regarded as a voluntary migrant, he has been able to acknowledge his status; living away from his "original culture and not fitting into mainstream British identities" (Leusmann144). He retains an identity in harmony with his home country and does not foresee a life-long stay in Britain. It is an immensely important gain when one identifies the identity construction through discrepancies. Before his journey, Chanu was not prepared to free his universe of thoughts because he had no idea how his presence in Britain was perceived by the majority of its population as different and unacceptable.

Nazneen more like a "phobic patient" objectifies her fears of accepting reality (Bery and Murray 2000). She transforms this belligerence into conciliation; a positive attribute. "Aggression" and "unconscious" actually mingled in culture in the form of phobia and sometimes as fantasy (Fanon 232). Ali's narrative replicates such fears of expatriates. Their adherence to traditional language, food and clothes exhibit claustrophobia, which denotes their minds are restricted and they disprove the thoughts of adopting unfamiliar ways of living at the cost of losing their identity. Hence, South Asian immigrants face a manifold cultural shock in case of migration to Western countries. They do not completely follow the Western ways. Fear of losing their connection to ancestral land keeps them from adopting foreign culture. This fear also provides sustenance to what they have left behind.

Language as a strong barrier creates fear and diminishes confidence. Once it is overcome,

expatriates comfortably survive the disparities in foreign countries. An individual's "inside" is developed through experiences that life offers (cited in Lusting and Koester 6). There are multi layers of cultures at work against their existing circumstances creating new identities. Nazneen and Chanu's concern to educate their children in their native language is an endeavour to strengthen their cultural connections. This also reflects their fear of losing language ties. Language alienation retains one's identity surely at risk. Language conveys a familiar "cultural sensibility" (Sarup95). Language alienation leads to a sense of - not belonging to the surrounding that can clearly be discerned in Nazneen's personality. Once she learns it, she starts feeling secure. The couple attempts to keep their culture functional in the lives of their children who show resistance to accept their parents' tradition to be incorporated in them. As a result, they develop restiveness. Chanu's frequent remarks of being immigrant is "to live out a tragedy" exposes the leading conflicts of the narrative (Ali 112). They are locked up.

Plausibly, it is the "odd mixture of continents and blood of here and there of belonging and not" that causes their restlessness and boredom (Kureishi3). The narrative gains more strength when Chanu speaks about the clash between Western values and his own. Chanu speaks of the incorporation of the immigrants into indigenous culture and the need to secure "one's identity and heritage" (Ali113). Ali consciously raises a question against a society in which the immigrant's "sanity" is at risk in order to achieve "the best for [their] family" (Ali114). Actions and discourse of her immigrant characters show proclivity "towards perpetual marginality" (Spivak14). Description of Chanu's shattered dreams and his decision to go back to his country reverberate it.

To say, it is actually the social and moral disposessions that make the expatriates claustrophobic. For Nazneen, it appears as the consciousness of the "inevitable" (Pastakia para3). She responds to her surroundings. She is conscious of where she had been and where she was then. She appears in a state of confusion in the initial pages of the book "feeling, a stab in the lungs" (Ali 16). Her phobia keeps her anxious of the objects and the outer world initially but a development in her mental state remains inescapable. Her aggression to objectify her fear of reality compels her to commit adultery. Ali's narrative maps the economic struggle of immigrants in England for their survival. Migration influences social relationships. Economic conditions create hindrances in maintaining relationship for the expatriates. "At one hundred pounds a week Nazneen would be able to save nothing, even if she worked half the night" (Ali 12). Humble economic condition of her family emerges as yet another major factor subduing her. Borrowing a

large amount of money from Mrs. Islam worsens the situation for Nazneen.

The narrative focuses Nazneen and follows a chronology to show her personality development clearly classifying two discernable phases– her past which was over and the one which was yet to begin. There seems always “an acre of ground in the New World which keeps growing echoes in [her] head” (Lamming152). She undergoes such a psychological trauma:

Sometimes, when she put her head on the pillow and began to drift into sleep, she jerked herself awake in panic. How could she afford to relax? She had to focus hard to get through each day (Ali 205).

Memories of “home in a small village of Dhaka” trouble Nazneen’s mind. However, her sister Hasina’s letters are good companions she could trust in distress; spending hours reading and meditating each letter. Initially, she accepts her situation as her “fate”. Fearful in many ways, she enters the second phase voluntarily with no alternatives. She looks like “a word in a foreign language” transforming into a new being (Nayar2008). Inspired by new environment, she starts questioning her existence that leads to her character transformation. She reflects the “transnational character” of Diasporas and responds to the host society by pacifying her subjectivity (Cohen xi). She develops a disposition to investigate the surroundings. It reflects her movement forward to live in “analepsis” to foresee the future and “prolepsis” that involves a degree of uncertainty at the standpoint of a completely new location and life (Nayar189). She is not a completely changed woman. But she unfolds the layers of her personality as the time passes on:

She had to concentrate hard to get through each day. Sometimes, she felt as if she held her breath the entire evening. It was up to her to balance the competing needs to soothe here and urge there, and push the day along to its close (Ali 205).

Concept of home develops in Ali’s narrative to unfold many layers of meanings. There is a fear of “rootlessness” and acceptability at the same time (Rushdi29). Nazneen’s thoughts are scaring and horrendous as if willingly jumping into water “cold enough to make someone scream” (Ali207). She stands at the verge where two cultures meet. Her psychological trauma is depicted in her decision to involve herself in life once more. It detaches her from Chanu whose decision to go back home (Dhaka) elevates her feelings of anxiety. With passing years, her memory of home alters into a painful recollection gathering like a “lump” in her throat, “a thing without substance but with an undeniable presence” (Ali329). Many a times, she appears “disorient [ated]” (Bery and Murry2000). Consequently, artificiality, impurity and inconsistency in decisions clearly reflect the

“in-betweenness” of these characters (Mishra 2012, Gilroy 1995).

Image of a “transparent space” finds voice in Nazneen’s actions (Blunt 15). Her dream of a life beyond certain social boundaries is explicitly revealed in her refusal to go back. Her actions reflect a “stern imaginative challenge” that makes her more creative and confident (Boehmer186). Western influence fabricates her “ideals” and “cultural values” no matter if these wound her feelings or prove beneficial for her (Boehmer187). Finding herself oppressively surrounded by foreign society, her only shelter is prayers. She recomposes her subjectivity envisaging England and America as lands offering security to women:

What would happen to Chanu in Dhaka? ... How would they live? How would they eat? Would it not be better to stay there and send more money to Hasina? (Ali 405)

Nazneen’s realization to control her fate in England reflects the third world woman bargaining with patriarchy in various ways (Kandiyoti 1989). She prefers to placate the new environment realizing that Third World societies replicate patriarchal attitudes which are aggravated in the wake of economic discrepancies (Momsen 87). She negotiates her identity to enjoy the status of an independent woman and to secure her daughters’ future. She can see the “criss-cross patterns of a thousand surface scars, the colors that shifted and changed in light, the unchanging nature of what lay beneath” (Ali 492). Her compassion for Karim as a born “foreigner” (Ali 448) escorts the readers on their way to discover a “rigid essentialized model of identity” (Shackleton2). This identity appears concealed within the past and at the same time confronted with the “multicultural flux of the present” (Shackleton2).

Perceived within Bhabha’s notion of identity, Nazneen is “in a moment of transit” where space and time cross “to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion” (Bhabha37). Her displacement breeds in her a constant anxiety. Yet she learns to liberate herself and functions as a self-regulating person who does not remain in contention but decides to stay back in London. She breaks her ties with her lover ultimately and recognizes herself a completely enlightened woman capable of thinking and performing. Her wish to skate on the ice is symbolic of her love for freedom indicating proximity to adopt change. She takes control of her life and enables herself to overcome the irrational fear of the place. Exposure lends her a new vision. Being a subordinate throughout her life, she learns from experiences to take decisions. Her consciousness does not by any means indicate her feelings of being ashamed of her past, rather she acquires dignity. Her struggles reflect her self –

determination with a conscious effort. Fusion of her past history and present situation gives her new identity. She assumes a distinct cultural individuality conforming to the notion that her identity does not only have to do with “being” but also “becoming” (Sarup14). Her “dislocation” appears not a failure but an expansion of cultural and aesthetic experiences (Mukherjee33). Moreover, *Said's* notion of “intellectual exile” also provides assistance to perceive Nazneen’s situation. She is caught between “what has been left behind” and “what is actually here and now” (Said 2002).

Another strong character of the narrative, Karim also admits that to have a Bangladeshi identity is not adequate. “If you wanted to be cool you had to be something else—a bit white, a bit black, a bit something” (Ali263). He represents those who survive with the fear that they have been trapped forever. Caught between the “whites” and “blacks”, Karim considers the powerless position of all immigrants around the world cautiously no matter if they are white, black or Bangladeshis. It replicates his assimilation that as a young radical he is potent to adopt the environment if it guarantees survival. Portrayal of Mrs. Islam in the narrative also replicates the image of a woman who happily assimilates new culture and negotiates her identity:

I am not old-fashioned,’ said Mrs. Islam. I don’t wear burkha. I keep purdah in my mind, which is the most important thing. Plus I have cardigans and anoraks and a scarf for my head. But if you mix with all these people, even if they are good people, you have to give up your culture to accept theirs. That’s how it is (Ali 29).

These immigrants succumb to their own culture at the expense of the new and integrate their identities in other nationalities. Clothes as markers of identity hold a significant position in culture. Burkha or purdah embodies Bengali culture while cardigans and anoraks symbolize Western culture. Wearing traditional clothes is a pertinent way of maintaining culture. However, it can be discerned that Mrs. Islam motive for “not wearing burkha” showing herself “modernized” is a futile effort to assimilate the Western culture. Razia also holds British culture and clothes stepping ahead to meet British culture.

But I must wear it, from time to time. I hear what they are saying. Razia is a little touched. Crazy, crazy.’ She clucked a little and made some crooning noises. ‘Razia is so English. She is getting like the Queen herself (Ali 229).

Perspectives of these characters indicate fears of not being accepted in case they fail to incorporate themselves into foreign culture. Although the focus of the narrative is Nazneen, her

character transformation, her disconnect and emancipation, it equally encounters the fears of all the immigrant characters.

Nazneen, Chanu, and almost all the other characters are in “[a] lingering dissolution” (Beckett22). Nazneen along with her female companions decide to stay back in England. It depicts her insightfulness not to deprive her daughters of the freedom and education which English society offers. On the contrary, Chanu, apparently a liberal considers England depriving his children the values of his own culture. Both are able to discover the facts which were otherwise veiled or laid ignored throughout their lives. Through various experiences they attain self-consciousness. Their consciousness is their weapon of resistance. Nazneen’s connection of her past to the present state is reconstructing a new existence. She is a part of the “imagined community”- people who perceive themselves as part of the dominant group. Indulged in a continuous effort of reconstructing and reinventing her identity, her migration is a predicament that turns into pleasure. She liberates herself from the fears whereas Chanu’s ideals collapse instilling in him a strong desire to look back. He fails to compromise the subjectivity. For him exile becomes affliction.

Conclusion

The immigrants negotiate their past with the present situation re-constructing new identities. Their subjectivity is either calmed down or triggered up in a foreign environment. Cultural restrictions generate apprehensions. Nazneen and Chanu are exposed to unfamiliar dimensions of a foreign country. However, the multi-layers are untangled to develop their consciousness helping them to grow mature in their own ways. In Chanu’s case, his claustrophobia is more dominant leading him to panic since he anticipates a dangerous situation for his family in London at the cost of traditions and culture. Nazneen, however, tends to face and experience a new life though with distress. Distance lends new prospects; healing her from the poignant past. Unshackling fears, her daring choice to negotiate her conventional identity expands new meaning of life. Her consciousness incorporates her present into a strong bond with her homeland. Nonetheless, her experiences lead her to forsake the memory of homeland.

Pursuing new home, Chanu’s failure in England generates his fears of getting lost in the distant surge. His claustrophobia sustains and forces him for a decision to go back. Distance and cultural differences approach him to embrace his past. It was at this juncture that culture functions as a bonding agent. Hence, Ali successfully explores memories of home, marginal status of the

immigrants and the “in-betweenness” that resist consistency and unconventional ideas of fixity and belonging. Her writings strained with the vital presence of melancholy and the concept of home inhabits the physical space as well as the symbolic conceptualization of where one belongs to. Ali breaks away from the conventional structure of identity crises and poses a conciliatory ending for every major character of the narrative. In *Brick Lane*, “escalation” of fear to a level of irrationality pertains to environment with negative and positive implications when a step back is a step forward. Life is regenerated for those who gather up their strengths to contest their existing situation.

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